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EDITORIALS

A Centennial Salute to Alice Hamilton

THE celebration by Dr. Alice Hamilton of her hundredth birthday on February 27, 1969, is a welcome and appropriate occasion to salute her outstanding contribution to the health and welfare of the American worker. Occupational health as a specific field of investigation and practice is of relatively recent origin in the United States, and the name of Alice Hamilton looms large in its development. The medical study of occupational health did not really exist in this country prior to the nineteenth century. During the last century, however, some knowledge of industrial health slowly accumulated as a result of sporadic investigations. Nonetheless, in 1912, in the period when Alice Hamilton began her researches, a European physician could dispose of American activity in occupational health with a curt remark that it did not exist.

Yet it was to be the accomplishment of the twentieth century to unite health research, administrative action, and social reform for improvement of the worker's health. By the time of Alice Hamilton's retirement from active par-

ticipation, health problems arising from exposure to dangerous working conditions and noxious substances had been recognized in numerous instances, and measures had been taken to prevent or to ameliorate the effects resulting from such exposure. Although much still remains to be done, great changes have been brought about in bettering the health of workers; and in all these developments Alice Hamilton played an important part.

Protection of workers in dangerous occupations was the central focus of Dr. Hamilton's endeavors, but she saw this task in a broad social context, a view created out of the wide variety of influences encountered in the course of her life. A reading of her life story leaves little doubt that her early unconventional schooling at home was an important factor in preparing her for the career to which she devoted her life. She and her three sisters were taught chiefly by their parents, with an emphasis on doing one's own searching for knowledge, clear thinking, and the importance of original and independent approaches to problems.

A native of Fort Wayne, Indiana, Dr. Hamilton studied medicine at the University of Michigan, where her teachers

were John J. Abel, W. H. Howell, Victor Vaughan, F. H. Novy, and George Dock. Graduation from medical school was followed by further study in Germany, and at the Johns Hopkins University.

In 1897, Alice Hamilton went to Chicago to teach pathology in the Woman's Medical School of Northwestern University. At the same time she became a resident of Hull House, the pioneer settlement house, founded in 1889 by Jane Addams. Here she learned to know at first hand the pressing social problems of the day, and here she made the cause of the workers her own. It was the experience at Hull House that aroused her interest in industrial diseases; and in 1910, when Governor Deneen of Illinois appointed an Occupational Disease Commission, Dr. Hamilton was included among the members. This led to her pioneering studies of lead poisoning among pottery workers and painters. For the next thirty-odd years her energies were devoted to the discovery and prevention of occupational disease. The conditions and industries to which Dr. Hamilton turned her attention included spastic anemia of the fingers in stonecutters, carbon monoxide poisoning in steel workers, silicosis of sandblasters, and the chemical intoxications of workers in war industries.

In carrying out her studies Dr. Hamilton was associated with the Department of Labor and the Harvard Medical School. She joined the faculty of the latter institution in 1919 and became professor emeritus in 1935. At various times she has been associated with other private and public organizations concerned with occupational health. Dr. Hamilton has been a member of the American Public Health Association since 1910, and served as vice-president of the Association in 1943.

As one might expect from a woman of independent mind, Dr. Hamilton has at various times advocated causes and positions that have met with opposition. She has been an advocate of interna-

tional cooperation, an opponent of war and militarism, a proponent of the rights of workers, and of rights of the individual vis-a-vis the state. These causes and actions have made up the record of a life which sets a shining example for all those who wish to improve the well-being of their fellow-men and to leave the world a little better than they find it. On her centenary we salute Alice Hamilton, a gallant fighter in the continuing battle against ignorance, selfishness, and apathy to obtain a square deal for the men and women who labor to produce what society needs.

On the Limits of Mental Health

ONE issue that became clear during the May, 1968, Conference of Deans of Schools of Public Health, their mental health program directors, and members of the National Institute of Mental Health staff was the difficulty of defining mental health activities.* What are the relations between courses linking social conditions to health generally and mental health teaching? Does the concept of "social health" include, or is it included in, the concept of mental health? A course on the history of public health may discuss outbreaks of group hysteria in the middle ages: does this make public health history a mental health course? Put another way and rather crassly, is everything that involves personality functioning to be understood as being of the substance of mental health? Does the concept of mental health encompass everything because it admittedly is essential for a full understanding of all phenomena of human function and malfunction?

The problem is important and still is largely unsolved at the theoretical level, though progress is being made and thinking appears a little less foggy than it did

* National Conference on Mental Health in Public Health Training. Airlie House, Warrenton, Va. May 27-30, 1968.